

Leach, Sharon (2014). *Love It When You Come, Hate It When You Go*. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd, pp. 200

Michela Calderaro
(Università degli Studi di Trieste, Italia)

Born in Kingston, Jamaica, a writer and columnist for the *Jamaica Observer* and editor of the paper's weekly literary arts magazine *Bookends*, Sharon Leach is an accomplished fiction writer whose works have always been praised for the bluntness of her prose, direct style and unique female perspective.

Her stories have appeared in anthologies and literary journals – *Kunapiipi*; *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*; *Iron Balloons: Fiction from Jamaica's Calabash Writer's Workshop*; *Blue Latitudes: An Anthology of Caribbean Women Fiction Writers*; the *Jamaica Journal*; *Caribbean Writing Today*; *Calabash: A Journal of Arts and Letters*; *AfroBeat Journal*; *Pepperpot: Best New Stories From the Caribbean*.

In 2011, she was awarded the Musgrave Bronze Medal by the Council of the Institute of Jamaica in recognition of her achievement in the field of literature.

Her first collection of short stories, *What You Can't Tell Him*, published in 2006 by Star Apple Publishers (Trinidad), portrayed a society populated by characters on the threshold of choices that they, as well as the reader, hoped would bring them peace if not happiness, or in dire situations from which the reader was eager to see them escape.

But there is no redemption offered for Sharon Leach's characters even in her new work. The men and women we encounter in *Love It When You Come, Hate It When You Go*, share the same fate of their predecessors.

Indeed, this eagerly awaited new collection represents a merciless examination of a society destined, probably, not to find salvation.

We witness a failing humanity, frozen at some existential critical point, struggling to pull itself out of the gutter, locked in dysfunctional situations. There is no salvation when these characters' expectations are turned into broken dreams and they are left to face a brutal reality.

Surprisingly, however, the tone of Ms Leach's writing is never depressed nor depressing: her characters are ready to rise again and again after each suffered blow, and we keep rooting for their success, failure after failure.

Ms Leach's maturity as a writer shines through the pages of her new stories, and her strong visual and sensual prose perfectly renders the harsh and difficult lives of the characters, who, though they happen to be Jamaican, meet failures, hopes and despair universally shared by all humanity.

This new collection is a mixture of many *sounds*: we hear the rhythm and drumbeats of Jamaican culture, but we also hear the cry of every woman and every man who inhabit any cosmopolitan city.

It is indeed a collection of cosmopolitan fragments of life, where characters use, or attempt to use, whatever they have to offer, often sex, in order to reach their goals.

While these characters find themselves in situations that might appear at first difficult to accept, or even to fathom, we soon realise that these are people we are acquainted with, or heard about, or just briefly met, because they are all believable, and their voices clear and personal.

Each character has actually his or her own voice; we hear only *their* version of the story, be it in the first or third person narration, and we are drawn to listen to their stories. The author successfully detaches her persona from the page, does not express any kind of judgment towards her creations, giving the reader pieces of their lives, to see and at times to pity, never to judge.

Sharon Leach's multilayered stories deal with contemporary Caribbean life, with mainly urban middle-class women and men who are all very candid about their sexual needs or obsessions.

She paints a frank portrayal of a society that mirrors our time, made of characters we may very well know, some impoverished, or on the verge of losing whatever meagre wealth they have, they are our neighbours, family members, our peers.

There's a thread connecting each story to another, a thread of despair and loneliness, and not surprisingly in most stories words and expressions such as 'alone' and 'by yourself' pepper the pages.

Though there is hope at the beginning of the characters' journeys, such hope often turns into despair and defeat. What they *do* accomplish is only the passage from sadness to tragedy, and when they think they have found some sort of consolation, it is actually just a passive acceptance of the lesser evil.

Their struggles, resilience and drive to overcome the odds are not enough, and even when they do feel strong enough and choose a line of action that would pull them out of their predicaments, deep down they know that whatever they do the reality they live in would not change.

And if at times it seems they are bound to earn some sort of respite, they actually find themselves on the brink of a personal abyss.

However, a sliver of precious hope is to be found, and cherished, in the stories of Daniel («Love Song») and Sugar and Celine («Comfort»). We follow their paths down to the last page, realising there might still be some brighter

future in their lives, some redemptive opportunities, some recognition that things could change. Whether this will actually happen is left unsaid.

Some of the characters seem to be projections or extensions of characters we rooted for in Sharon Leach's previous collection – like Sugar, who reappears here to begin her transformation into the person she hopes she would become, able to leave behind her poverty and misery, to begin a journey towards a future yet to be built.

This story is central to the collection, since in it we find all the elements that are present in the other stories – secrets, sex, shame, desire to escape an ugly and brutal reality, lies, white lies, denial and silence.

Here too, just as in the previous collection, at the core of the characters' existence there's often a secret – their own, or their loved ones' – that must be kept hidden from society, from their spouses or parents, and it is a secret that will endanger, or destroy, their lives, their physical or mental health. Errors, even innocent errors, of the past are never left to rest, and each of these women and men, without exception, ends up paying the consequences of such errors.

Secrets need a fictional 'truth' in order to embark on a new dream life; a fake, perfect, dream life – a perfect marriage, a perfect heterosexual identity, a perfect father/daughter relationship.

Without any trace of sensationalism, or voyeurism, we are shown what lies behind the pretension of these perfect lives. Often, the origins of evil lie within the family, and often the 'perpetrators' are the fathers. Incest is a reality seldom discussed or exposed, but has been surfacing lately in many younger writers' works. It is a reality that appears to be common in all communities, that crosses classes and social positions, and that Sharon Leach reports using the characters' voices, letting them tell their stories without any authorial comment.

These are voices that would remain with the reader long after turning the last page, voices that go deep into our consciousness, voices we cannot ignore nor dismiss:

Ten years ago, I found out that I wasn't my father's only girlfriend. (126)

I stared at him, finally understanding. [...] He was here to dump me. "All these years, I told myself that what we did was my choice". I stood up. "I know what you did to Stephen and Jimmy. You did the same thing to me. [...] You're a sick piece of shit". [...] "Sweetheart", he said [...]. "If I am, then what are you?" (136)

Incest, homosexuality, infidelity and betrayal, none of these must be exposed, under penalty of exclusion, rejection and social ostracism.

So they all tell themselves lies and behave as if they do not, hoping such lies would either fade away over time or be transformed into a beautiful

reality – only to later discover that lies and secrets never go away, that they would only stay hidden behind a flimsy veil that would always be ready to blow open and expose what is actually only a semblance of normality.